A Preliminary Analysis of Dschang Clausal Structure: The View from Tense, Aspect and Negation

Dschang (ISO 639-3 ybb) is a Grassfields Bantu (GB) language of the Bamileke cluster spoken in Western Cameroon. Since Hyman (1980), it has been known that past and future temporal construals in Dschang are subject to uniquely encoded remoteness distinctions made available via dedicated segmental and/or tonal markers, but to date very little is understood about their underlying morphosyntactic structure and semantics.

This talk presents a cluster of three newly observed morphosyntactic generalizations regarding Dschang's temporal markers & negation (Czuba 2021b). Drawing from recent (Czuba 2021a) and ongoing fieldwork in the language, and taking as a starting point previous work on a closely related GB language (Nkemnji 1995 on Nweh), I propose an analysis to capture these observations in a syntax suitable syntactic proposal for their structure and linearization, likewise paving a way forward for formal semantic analysis of temporal remoteness markers and negation in Dschang.

Negation in Dschang is minimally bipartite, with two distinct and co-occurring negative markers. As (1) shows, NEG_1 occurs between the past marker and the verb. NEG_2 surfaces in clause-final position.

(1) Shù'fo le **te** káŋ mbap **á**
    Shufo DIST.PST NEG_1 fry meat NEG_2
    `Shufo did not fry the meat.'

These negatives are thus given distinct syntactic positions. Next, there is a left-right asymmetry with respect to NEG_1 and segmental tense markers: past tense markers always precede NEG_1, ex. (2a,b), while future markers must follow it, ex. (3a,b).

(2) a. Shufó **kɔ́** **té** káŋ m̀báp á.
      Shufo YST.PST NEG_1 fry meat NEG_2
      `Shufo didn't fry the meat (yesterday).'

    b. *Shufó **té** **kɔ́** káŋ m̀báp á.
        Shufo NEG_1 YST.PST fry meat NEG_2

(3) a. Shufó **té** **kuwɔ́** káŋ m̀báp á.
      Shufo **NEG_1** TDY.FUT fry meat NEG_2
      'Shufo won't fry the meat (today).'

    b. *Shufó **kuwɔ́** **té** káŋ m̀báp á.
       Shufo TDY.FUT NEG_1 fry meat NEG_2

Futures thus merge lower than past elements, and must be linearized with respect to NEG_1/NEG_2. Lastly, there is a distinctive surface word order variation ("Negative Inversion") available to a subset of negated temporal constructions, whereby postverbal material comes to precede V in negative sentences. Negative Inversion is systematically banned in all sentences with future tense, as shown in (4a,b):

(4) a.   Shufo **le** té **m̀bap káŋ**.
          Shufo DIST.PST NEG_1 meat fry
          `Shufo didn't fry the meat.'

    b. *Shufo te **luú** **mbap káŋ**.
          Shufo NEG_{1a} DIST.FUT meat fry
          `Shufo won't fry the meat.'

Assuming a [PAST … [Neg2P … [Neg1P … [FUT …]]]] clausal hierarchy, I show how a combination of verbal head movement to Neg1 and XP-movement to {Spec,Neg1P} is capable of deriving these data straightforwardly, raising questions about the treatment of other syntactic elements such as auxiliaries, aspectual verbs, focus positions (Brown & Torrence 2021), and various adverbial elements in the clausal spine. I will also present the result of preliminary elicitation efforts investing the interpretations achieved of embedding Dschang temporal markers in the complements of reportative and attitude verbs as well as relative clauses.

Selected References

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